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AUTHOR Cordero, Anne D.
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ABSTRACT

A translation course on the intermediate college level of instruction is described. The author considers translation to be a skills course which should be among the options open to college students, and stresses the importance of the course. The course activities move from articles of a general scientific nature, basically concerned with transmitting information, through newspaper and magazine articles and editorials whose subject is political, to literary texts that involve a more complex linguistic operation. The approach in this course focuses on translation exercises into the native language, called "versions." Such exercises are viewed as exercises of precision and of stylistics as well as tests of comprehension in the foreign language and of the student's aptitude to transpose into his or her own language. The steps in the translation exercise are the following: (1) several careful readings of the foreign language text to achieve precise and thorough understanding, (2) familiarization with the subject matter or documentation, (3) establishing lists and definitions of unknown words and expressions, (4) writing the translation, (5) transposing the first draft to an idiomatic native language text, and (6) a group critique. The other two activities in the course are putting the "version" into the original language and writing a precis of the original in the target language. (AMH)

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Anne D. Cordero
3818 N. Ridgeview Rd.
Arlington, Va. 22207

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The Role of Translation in Second Language Acquisition

by Anne D. Cordero

The need for translation is especially acute in our modern world. Not only do nations depend on it to bridge what would otherwise be an impossible communication gap, but it also affords access to a wealth of scientific and technical information, as well as to the ideas that help shape our society. Supersonic jets and telecommunication have "shrunk" our world. Yet, ancient language barriers are still in force and make translation more necessary now than ever before. In fact, our age has been called the age of translation.

As an activity, translation is a specific skill whose practice extends over differing areas with distinct objectives. In Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais, J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet distinguish among the following three main areas of translation: educational, professional, and linguistic research. [1]

As an educational activity, translation is considered a learning device or a convenient means of verifying comprehension and accuracy. Quite unlike this kind of activity is the work of the professional translator who no longer translates to understand, but to make others understand. The third area of concern, namely linguistic research, is based on the notion

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of translation as an instrument of linguistic analysis. It involves the comparative study of two languages, of how one language functions with respect to the other. Furthermore, translation sheds light on certain linguistic phenomena which otherwise would remain unknown, as Vinay and Darbelnet seem to think.

Since my subject focuses on the role of translation in second language acquisition, we must eliminate to a large degree this third area. However, I believe that the first two objectives, namely educational and professional, can be met to a certain extent on the intermediate college level, since there, language acquisition does not stop, but is a continuous process during which the educational function can lead to and be combined with the professional objective. How this can be achieved forms the subject of my presentation.

During the last three decades translation has been a controversial element in the teaching of foreign languages. It is still associated with the learning and testing process of the grammar-translation approach. Since the then prevailing objectives and teaching preferences were based on the audio-lingual approach, direct-method followers banned translation as a learning device from the classroom. Translation was accepted only as an exercise in the artistic use of English. In the Northeast Conference Reports of 1956 one reads the following statement:

> Translation and especially non-selective or extensive translation is alien to the goals of the language

> sequence and detrimental to the interests of the better students. 2

The argument underlying this statement is that translation interposes an intermediate process between the concept and the way it is expressed in the foreign idiom, thus impeding the student's ability to think directly in the foreign language. It may be argued that even when students are taught by direct methods, they usually interpose this intermediate step themselves, especially older students.

It should be noted that I see translation not as the exclusive foreign language course in a student's language program, but as a skills course among diversified options. When properly developed and taught, it can maintain and strengthen its own vital role, while contributing to the development of other skills and consequently to a higher overall competence. Translation is thus conceived as an end desired in itself and as a method of furthering proficiency in the foreign language. To believe that translation is only a goal to be approached when a high degree of proficiency is reached is to deny the language instructor a valuable medium of the teaching process.

Regretfully, much of the controversy of the place of translation in second language acquisition has been at cross-purposes, since the nature of translation is frequently misunderstood, and its function in the learning process not specified. The subject was hotly debated in several issues of Linguistische Berichte. While the participants of the debate

disagreed on the exact place of translation within the curriculum of higher education and the extent to which translating can be taught, most of them agreed on the legitimacy of translation as an academic discipline that can be taught and learned.[3] In general theorists and educators also agree on the need for a codification of translation techniques and a text-typology oriented towards translation for the purpose of facilitating the teaching of translation within the curriculum of higher education.

The remarks that follow are based on personal experiences gathered during many years of teaching translation. In view of the virtual non-existence of appropriate textbooks, important consideration must be given to the choice of materials that are to be translated. In the beginning of the course it is best to select an article of a general scientific nature, since such a text is normally written in a descriptive, factual style the structure of which lends itself well to a study of distinctions of syntax, and the contrastive aspects of sentence and paragraph formation. This type of translation is basically concerned with transmitting information. Consequently, the student has first to decode and then to "re-encode" the source text correctly and exactly without incurring a loss which could affect the interpretation of important data. Of a somewhat more complicated nature are newspaper and magazine articles or editorials whose subject is political. While syntactical and semantic difficulties increase, the task of

translating the text remains usually manageable due to the fact that students read newspapers and are therefore familiar not only with the subject matter but also with the appropriate language.

The literary translation is the object of a specific concern since it is considered the most difficult of all. Its purpose is not to verify understanding, as in the case of the pedagogical exercise, but, on the contrary, to provide it; nor is it to pass on simply information, as is the case in a scientific or commercial translation. A more complex operation is involved. Ladmiral defines a literary translation in general terms as follows: "La finalité d'une traduction consiste à nous dispenser de la lecture du texte original."[4] I would like to elaborate this statement: The process involved in a literary translation consists of different successive stages: The source language in which the author has encoded his personal feelings and thoughts is decoded by the translator and then transposed or "re-encoded" into a new idiom that may be just as personal and subjective as the source language. The translator thus becomes the coauthor, for his work is by necessity interpretative. The choices that the translator faces in this process do not only depend on his understanding of the source text, but also, for example, on the cultural level of the reader and his familiarity with the original author. The choices affecting the loss or "entropy" of a selective aspect in the translation determine to a large degree its quality. In general one could

state that in a literary translation the emphasis is not on the decoding of the source text, but on the style of the target language.

There are certain approaches to the teaching of translation which have worked well in my own courses. For practical purposes we distinguish in a translation course between the thème, - translating into the foreign idiom,- and the version, where the target text is in one's own language. A practising translator is at times called upon to do both, but his activities are mostly limited to the version. The reason for this is quite obvious: The means of expression which a person has at his disposal in his mother tongue can hardly be matched in a second language, unless of course, the person is bilingual and in that case, the distinction between thème and version becomes meaningless. Since for the practising translator the version is the main activity, I place strong emphasis on this aspect in a translation course. Even though I try to approximate realistic working conditions by selecting texts from journals in various disciplines, and not texts especially intended for students with semantic and lexical difficulties in part removed, the version represents at the same time a two-fold pedagogical exercise. It is a) an exercise of precision, b) a stylistic exercise. It is also a two-fold test. It tests a) the student's comprehension in the foreign language, b) his aptitude to transpose into his own tongue. Comprehension and transposition are two necessary and successive stages in the translation

process. One must insist here on the word "successive." And each stage bears one dominant desired characteristic: a) precision for comprehension, b) quality for transposition.

In order to arrive at these desired characteristics, the entire text needs to be read first. In the translation course this should be done out loud - providing thus still another linguistic exercise: pronunciation. Furthermore, through the reading aloud of the text the instructor has the advantage of demonstrating the way in which phrasing, emphasis, and grouping can bring out the meaning and the tone of the source language. At the same time it fixes characteristic patterns in the student's mind to facilitate retention of sentence structure. At this stage of the translation exercise do not stop at semantic or lexical difficulties in the text. They are worked out later on. Students should be encouraged to proceed the same way also when preparing assignments at home. If necessary, the text should be read several times until a global understanding of the text is achieved. The more precise and thorough this understanding, the less vocabulary needs to be looked up. In translation courses it is best to provide the students with two texts: one to be read in this fashion in class to illustrate the method, the other assigned for preparation at home. This procedure allows for greater efficiency and variety in class activities.

Once the student has read the source text, he has to fa-

miliarize himself with the subject matter. A translator calls this documentation. It is an important step which may include, for example, the reading of parallel texts in the target language, if the subject is of a highly specialized nature, such as is the case with legal or technical texts; or it may entail gathering background information on historical or cultural data. This, incidentally, is an excellent way for the student to expand his knowledge of the civilization of the country whose language he is studying. Initially the instructor has to show the student how best to do it, where to go for information, etc. The importance of documentation in the translation process cannot be emphasized enough.

After the basic comprehension of the source text has been achieved, we proceed paragraph by paragraph and establish a list of unknown words and expressions in the order in which they are encountered in the text. Students should be encouraged to use a monolingual dictionary (for home use Le Petit Larousse Illustré is adequate), in conjunction with a good, up-to-date bilingual dictionary. From the definitions and explanations given, the student will then be able to choose an equivalent expression, appropriate for the context. A fringe benefit derived from this exercise is that the student learns to understand and work with dictionaries. From the beginning the instructor should stress that words rarely translate words, but that they represent whole areas of meaning. Initially the student needs help in discovering translation units. This, of course, is an exellent way of teaching vocabulary in context.

After the first attempt at a version I ask the student to put aside the source text and concentrate on the wording of the target text. The first "rough" draft will undoubtedly seem awkward and badly written to the student. He has to transpose the text now and write it as an independent, original text. Here the student's aptitude in and knowledge of his own idiom is of prime importance. This activity is the truly creative part of the entire translating process. At this point I recommend that the student put himself into a monolingual frame of mind so as not to let his familiarity with the departure language influence the stylistic quality of the target text. The final version must then be confronted with the source text once more to insure against any inadvertent omission or inaccuracies.

Finally the version becomes the subject of still another exercise: the translation critique. Together, the students will examine both the source text and the various ways it has been translated by them. Very quickly they learn not only to think problems through and then debate possible solutions, but also to discern preferable solutions to a particular translation problem, and to recognize quality in stylistic matters as well. This exercise is extremely helpful. It contributes to the student's linguistic awareness and aids him to sharpen and alert his mind.

With respect to the thème I would like to add a few remarks to the ideas already outlined above. Ladmiral calls it an arti-

ficial exercise, reasoning that it is very unrealistic to expect the student to have bilingual competence, when in fact he is still trying to acquire a working knowledge of the foreign language.[5] The situation is of course quite different in professional translator schools that require the student to be competent in the target language already at the entrance level. A practising translator will be asked to translate into the foreign language technical and commercial texts and others of a more general nature. The "re-encoding" of a message seems quite possible in these specific areas. But even a professional translator will hardly endeavor to translate a literary work into a foreign tongue.

In general translation courses the thème serves as a pedagogical exercise designed to test and strengthen grammatical competence. In addition it may focus on the acquisition of a more active vocabulary in different areas. But in neither case can it really be called a "translation." I have used the thème in still another way: as a thème d'imitation. The version now becomes the source text and is used as a texte de base. From it I select certain syntagma to reenforce special linguistic elements. The student, by now thoroughly familiar with the texte de base, encounters few problems in translating, or rather "backtranslating." The thème used in such a way is a valuable exercise in the learning experience. It challenges the student while not demanding more than he can accomplish. At the same time, it provides a sense of accomplishment which exceeds his expectations.

In addition to the version and thème a third, equally important activity in translation courses is the contraction, or précis. The term contraduction is also used in French; it represents a combination of contraction and traduction, since after all, the exercise still involves translation. Contraction is especially recommended as a summary of the foreign language source text into one's own idiom, thus in the sense of a version. One might surmise that a summary into one's own language presents no real problems to the student. Yet, it is a special skill which is perfected only after a considerable amount of practice. A contraction requires not only a thorough comprehension of the source text, but also a critical mind for recognizing the most important information that needs to be conveyed as a coherent entity in the target language. In the beginning of a translation course the exercise is done in the classroom with all the students participating, until they develop a facility for this kind of activity.

The various activities taken up in translation courses are designed to develop practical and marketable skills for the foreign language student. However, the benefits of such courses are not limited exclusively to the development of translation skills. In the process the student has acquired knowledge and competence in other areas of the foreign language as well: He has practised pronunciation, built up his passive and active vocabulary, deepened his comprehension, and perfected his

writing ability. It all adds up to learning to communicate, and that is, after all, what foreign language learning is about.

George Mason University

Notes

1 J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet, Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais (Paris: Didier, 1958), pp. 24-25.

2 Northeast Conference Reports of the working committees, 1956, p. 90.

3 Stefan Ettinger, "Inwieweit ist die Übersetzung lehr- und lernbar?" Linguistische Berichte, 49 (1977), 63-78.

4 J.-R. Ladmiral, Traduire: Théorèmes pour la traduction (Paris: Payot, 1979), p. 15.

5 Ladmiral, p. 47.